

India's largest airline names outgoing IATA head as new chief executive

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Dhaka: India's largest airline IndiGo has named aviation industry veteran Willie Walsh as its new chief executive officer, tapping the outgoing head of global airline trade association IATA to lead the budget carrier through a recent operational crisis and drive its expanding international ambitions.

The new CEO, Walsh, succeeds Pieter Elbers, who departed following a major scheduling meltdown in December that resulted in the cancellation of more than 4,500 flights, the biggest crisis in IndiGo's 20-year history. Regulators subsequently reprimanded several senior executives, citing inadequate oversight of flight operations and crisis management.

Walsh's term at the International Air Transport Association ends on July 31, and he is expected to join IndiGo by August 3, the airline said in a

statement. Co-founder and managing director Rahul Bhatia has assumed temporary charge in the interim.

The appointment is widely seen as a significant move for IndiGo, which holds approximately 65% of India's domestic air connectivity, the fastest-growing commercial aviation market in the world. The airline is currently valued at INR 1.52 trillion, equivalent to USD 16.17 billion, though its shares have dropped 22% so far this year.

Walsh brings decades of high-level aviation experience to the role. He began his career as a cadet pilot at Aer Lingus in 1979 and rose to become its CEO in 2001. He subsequently led British Airways from 2005, guiding it through the global financial crisis and overseeing its merger with Iberia in 2011 to create the International Airlines Group (IAG). Later, he took charge of IATA in April 2021.

His appointment comes as IndiGo pursues aggressive international expansion, deploying longer-range Airbus A321XLR and A350 jets on overseas routes. The airline also faces headwinds from elevated costs driven by rerouting due to the Middle East conflict and Pakistani airspace restrictions.

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